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ABSTRACT

"Affirmative action" studies have reached a point which has produced for academic women a "crisis" or "turning point" in their professional lives. The problem is clearly evident, but remedial action has been very slow in development. Data on salary, rank, tenure, status, and policy-making powers illustrate few changes from previous discriminatory trends. To enhance credibility for academic women, a persuasive campaign utilizing argument, evidence, and the application of the analysis of rhetorical sensitivity and social interaction described by Hart and Burk must be launched. Utilization of methods of persuasion, power attainment, performance, publicity, and persistence to meet the credibility crisis promise real gains for women in the future. (BLB)

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Affirmative Action and Academic Women: A Crisis in Credibility

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This paper is not a polemic against the academic establishment or against a "sexist" social system. It is not a diatribe against men or what is termed "male chauvinism." It is not an exhortation to burn bras, hold funerals for "traditional" womanhood, march on administration buildings, or picket Miss America contests. Those kinds of actions have served their purpose. Their time has passed. This is, rather, a call for affirmative action by women in the academic world. Already on many campuses, Affirmative Action studies under Title IX of the 1972 Higher Education Act are now underway to determine the existence and extent of discrimination against women.[1] The Affirmative Action studies pose, I submit, a crisis to the credibility of professional women in the academic community.

The word crisis, in dramatic terms, signifies a decisive turning point, a stage in the action conflict from which some resolution must occur. In medical terms, crisis signifies the turning point in a disease, the point when it becomes clear whether the patient will live or die. The undertaking of Affirmative Action Studies constitutes an equally crucial point in our professional life -- a point from which some resolution will also occur. At this crucial point there is danger that we will do nothing, or simply be content with talking to each other. But there is opportunity also to

exert a leadership that will move Affirmative Action programs forward in a manner consonant with our needs and goals. Indeed, as professionals in the communicative arts and sciences we women confront a unique opportunity to apply the principles and skills we profess to understand and teach. We seek equality of opportunity, treatment, recognition, and reward in the academic system. Our actions now will demonstrate our desire and our willingness to make these conditions prevail -- and thereby establish the credibility of our cause and of our professional worth.

Lest anyone doubt the critical need for change, for Affirmative Action, let's examine a few facts. Twelve years ago, in a speech before the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Alan Pifer noted that women on university faculties were most often found in non-tenured positions, were promoted less frequently and rapidly than men, generally received lower salaries than men of comparable rank, rarely participated in decision-making bodies, and enjoyed less prestige than men.[2] Today, the situation is not much better. For example, at UWM my own university, a 1972 study by the Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of Women, uncovered the following facts. In salary, women received an average of $1500 to $3000 less than men of comparable rank, training, and experience AFTER equalization pay had been made. In administration, of 19 top positions, one is filled by a woman. She is Dean of the School of Nursing. On thirteen major committees with policy-making and advisement power, there is a total membership of 159 members, of whom 20 are women. The same trend holds in departmental make-up, in hiring, promotion, and rank considerations.[3] Though I am pleased to note

that in this area, my own department seems to be an exception. The bias indicated in the UWM study and other studies is echoed in a similar study at Oberlin College.[4] The startling point about these two studies is the similarity of conditions in two quite different kinds of academic institutions. Twelve years after the Pifer speech the Astin-Bayer report of May, 1972 surveyed 60,000 faculty members of 300 colleges and universities. That report summarized current situations, observing that in "sophisticated statistical terms" when matched with male faculty members "women are likely to hold lower academic rank, lack tenure, and earn less." As the authors note, the data reveals that "sex is a better independent predictor of rank than such other factors as . . .years since completion of education, numbers of years employed . . . or number of books published."[5]

These facts reveal the critical need for action by women to better their own conditions. The crisis in our credibility emanates from our response to this need, from the kinds of action we choose -- or refuse -- to use in our own behalf. I submit that our most appropriate response is to begin action now, concentrating our efforts in the particular academic organization in which we work, to effect reforms within the system through a persuasive campaign[6] that uses argument and evidence as viable rhetorical means to gain the ends we seek.

In launching such a campaign, the literature of our own field offers guidelines that are particularly relevant and applicable. For instance, the Hart and Burks analysis of rhetorical sensitivity and social interaction[7] may be especially useful. It will be recalled that Hart and Burks identified

the rhetorical approach with instrumental communication and delineated five characteristics of rhetorical sensitivity. Let us consider the adaptation and application of three of those points. The first characteristic of the rhetorically sensitive person was an acceptance of role-taking as a part of the human condition. Role-taking in this sense entails selection of those aspects of ourselves which when made rhetorically manifest will best meet the social conditions we face.[8] Application of this concept suggests that we analyze our roles in three areas: (1) who we are now and what we need to do; (2) what specific roles we need to assume within the academic organization; and (3) what role-relationships we must adopt vis-a-vis specific target receivers and decision-makers. Discovery of the first role relationships requires an initial program of identification and personal interaction among ourselves. By gathering women in our respective campus communities we come to know who we are, personally and professionally. We break the isolation from other women, share common experiences, situations, problems, gain a sense of identity and unity, illuminate specific cases of inequity. From this flows the necessary second phase of action, that of organization. Organization gets us off dead-center, gets us beyond mere ego-tripping talk and "therapy" sessions, enables the orderly identification of problems, and facilitates the development of an action strategy in a directed, goal oriented manner. Above all, organization provides the superiority of collective action over individual action. It gives us the potential power of numbers.

To achieve the second and third aspects of role-taking, that of assuming positions of policy and power within the academic organization, and that of

assuming role-relationships vis-a-vis specific target receivers, we need to move to the third stage of action -- analysis. Analysis gives us facts and understanding about the conditions of our existence in the academic community. We work in a hierarchical power structure, complete with communication networks and decision-making positions that form the nodes and locus of power. We need to understand how decisions are made, on what basis, by whom, in what order, and when. By discovering these facts, we can identify our target audiences -- those specific receivers who, in Bitzer's terms, are capable of mediating the proposals we make[9] and can facilitate our assumption of important positions within the hierarchy.

The mode of address to our target receivers is, I believe, of utmost importance. Here Hart and Burk's study again provides useful guidelines. They note that the rhetorically sensitive person avoids stylized verbal behavior[10] and is willing to undergo the strain of adaptation to the person addressed.[11] The avoidance of stylized verbal behavior suggests that we clear away the verbal debris and stylized jargon of radical women's lib. It is not particularly appropriate or productive for us in the academic arena. Let's throw out the term liberation -- it is rhetorically inaccurate. No one -- male or female -- is truly liberated except in their mental and spiritual capacity to cope with and transcend the conditions of existence. Further, the term liberation implies an oppressor-oppressed relationship that denegrates our own position and puts us in an adversary role with our receivers. Let's throw out name-calling and scape-goating. Such tactics are futile. They fail to identify specific injustices, fail to provide sound argument and evidence, will probably fail to intimidate resistors,

and may alienate allies. In short, to borrow from transactional terms,[12] let's abjure the rhetorical temper tantrums of child and respond, rather, with the rhetorical sophistication of adult that becomes us as professional communicators.

Finally, I believe, our campaign strategy must operate on two levels. Our messages must be directed immediately to specific target receivers, and secondarily must be disseminated to significant others to create a climate of pressure for our case and cause. However, the publication of inequities against women must be coupled with publication of achievements by women.

Through these methods -- persuasion, power, performance, publicity, and persistence -- I believe we can meet the crisis in credibility and demonstrate our expertise, dynamism, and integrity as individual women, as professionals, and as skilled communicators. I believe as the 1966 NOW statement of purpose concluded: ". . . women will do most to create a new image by acting now, and by speaking out in behalf of their own equality and freedom, and human dignity -- not in pleas for special privilege, nor in enmity toward men . . . but in active self-respecting partnership with men. By so doing, women will develop confidence in their own ability to determine actively the conditions of their life, their choices, and their future."[13]

FOOTNOTES

1. See Federal Laws and Regulations Concerning Sex Discrimination in Education Institutions, Washington, D.C., Association of American Colleges. Dist. by Project on the Status and Education of Women, Oct. 1972.

2. Alan Pifer, "Women in Higher Education," reprint of speech before Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Miami, Florida, (November 29, 1961), p. 7).

3. Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of Women at Univ. of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Jan. 11, 1972.

4. See Report & Recommendations From the Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of Women at Oberlin to the General Faculty and Oberlin College Community, Oberlin, Ohio. December 8, 1972.

5. Helen S. Astin and Alan E. Bager of the University Research Corporation. Study published in Chronical of Higher Education, May, 1972.

6. I use the term "persuasive compaign" in the sense delineated by Fotheringham as "a structured sequence of efforts to achieve adaption, continuance, deterrence, or discontinuance -- rather than as a one shot effort." See Wallace Fotheringham Perspectives on Persuasion, Boston, Allyn & Bacon, Inc., 1966, p. 35ff.

7. Roderick P. Hart and Don M. Burks, "Rhetorical Sensitivity and Social Interaction," SM 39:2 (June, 1972) pp. 75-91.

8. Hart & Burks, p. 77.

9. Lloyd Bitzer "The Rhetorical Situation" Phil. & Rhet. I:1 (January, 1968), p. 1-15. See especially p. 7-8, re: Rhetorical audience.

10. Hart & Burks, p. 79f.

11. Ibid., p. 82f.

12. Thomas A. Harris, I'm OK - You're OK: A Practical Guide to Transactional Analysis, Evanston, Ill.: Harper & Row, publishers, 1967. See especially Ch. 2 & 3 for full discussion of transactional terms.

13. National Organization of Women - Statement of Purpose, 1966, Washington, D.C. cited in Up From the Pedestal, ed. Aileen S. Kraditor. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968, p. 369.